

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ADDIS ABABA 003991

SIPDIS

AF FOR A/S FRAZER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/30/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ET](#) [ELEC](#) [UNREST](#)

SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: PM MELES TELLS DAS YAMAMOTO THAT GOE IS MOVING ON DEMOCRACY, BUT DEMANDS POLITICAL SPACE TO DO SO

Classified By: DAS Don Yamamoto for reason 1.4 (b,d)

1 (C) Summary: PM Meles told AF DAS Don Yamamoto Nov. 29 that his government was already moving to resume Ethiopia's "march toward democracy" following unrest in early November. Meles regretted the loss of life from the disturbances, and acknowledged that some mistakes had been made, but said the "insurrection" had to be put down. Yamamoto pressed for the release of CUD opposition leaders, but the PM replied that trying them for their alleged effort to overthrow the GOE was essential to developing a respect for the rule of law. CUD detainees will be formally charged on December 2; trials will be in ordinary courts and open to international observation. About 5,000 protestors will be charged with lesser offenses. The PM pledged that Parliament would conduct a review of its own rules of procedure and resume work on a new press law, drawing in both cases on expertise from developed parliamentary democracies. Meles promised a new National Electoral Board in June 2006 and indicated that local elections would likely be postponed until 2007 due to the need to calm current tensions. The PM expressed pessimism that a quorum of CUD MPs would take over the government of Addis Ababa, but said he would wait another few weeks before appointing a temporary government to fill the void. He also argued pointedly that political dialogue between the GOE and opposition parties could only resume after foreign embassies ceased providing opposition leaders an alternative to dealing directly with the EPRDF. Yamamoto and Charge argued that the GOE would continue to face problems with international donors over its treatment of the opposition, Meles vowed not to sacrifice what he called Ethiopia's long-term democratic development for the "mob justice" of international public opinion. He also reiterated his promise that his current term as Prime Minister would be his last. Septels will cover discussion concerning the Eritrean border and Somalia issues. End Summary.

2 (C) DAS Don Yamamoto met Nov. 29 with PM Meles Zenawi, accompanied by Charge Huddleston and PolEcon Counselor Kevin Sullivan. MFA Director for Europe and the Americas Grum Abay and a notetaker joined the PM. This message covers discussion on internal political issues. Septel will cover discussion of the border conflict with Eritrea and as well as policy toward Somalia.

Yamamoto: Is Ethiopia Still on Path to Democracy?

13. (C) Yamamoto told Meles that the Secretary had asked him to give the Prime Minister a sense of the concern in Washington over recent events in Ethiopia. He described recent protests at the White House and in Crawford, Texas, and underscored USG concerns about "hate messages" coming from some quarters of the Ethiopian Diaspora in Washington. The USG hoped Ethiopia would be a model for African democracy and an important ally on issues like Somalia and fighting terrorism. At the same time, U.S. leaders were worried about how the GOE was dealing with the opposition and the GOE's commitment to the process of democratization.

Meles: Insurgency Put Down, Stability Restored

14. (C) Meles conveyed his appreciation for the USG's response to recent developments, and emphasized that he wanted values -- not security -- to be the basis of our bilateral relationship. Ethiopia was involved in democratization not because of international pressure, however, but rather because it was essential to the country's long-term survival. He defended GOE efforts since the May 15 elections to engage in dialogue with the opposition and verify facts concerning the disputed election results. A key element of the ruling EPRDF coalition's strategy had been to break the link between hard-line elements of the opposition -- which were committed to overthrowing the constitution -- and the large body of voters who simply wanted to send the EPRDF a message of protest over particular policies like taxation and agricultural policy. That goal had been achieved.

15. (C) The PM expressed regret over the loss of life during early November street protests, calling deaths "completely unacceptable." He acknowledged that some errors had been made at the local level in dealing with the unrest, but said the "insurrection" had to be put down. Meles said the GOE had arrested over 10,000 people initially, comprised mostly of unemployed urban youth that had been "used" by Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) leaders. He added that the Eritrean government had practically "blackmailed" the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) to join the fray, but this effort to destabilize the country also failed. All detainees had now been screened; those who had merely thrown stones had been released. Around 5,000 detainees remained in custody and would be charged with lesser offenses that would like result in prison sentences of a few months. Detainees had initially faced risks of overcrowding and disease, but the GOE had moved quickly to address these problems and had spent a lot of money doing so. The country was now as stable as it ever had ever been.

CUD Leaders to be Charged, Tried in Open Court

16. (C) PM Meles told DAS Yamamoto that the GOE would formally charge imprisoned CUD leaders on Friday. (Note: CUD leaders announced Nov. 28 that several would begin a hunger strike that day. End note) Their trials would be open to their lawyers and family members as well as to representatives of the international community. If found innocent, leaders would be released. If found guilty, they would pay for their actions. Yamamoto argued that the trials of detained CUD leaders would overshadow whatever else the GOE did to strengthen democracy and create continuing angst in the international community. Meles replied that "this thing has to go all the way." Opposition leaders had never believed that they would go to jail for more than a few weeks; embassies would save them, they thought. It was important for the Diaspora and for future opposition to see that there were consequences for failing to respect the constitutional order. For that reason, the PM said, there would be no pardon any time soon. "I am aware of the public relations challenges these detentions pose externally," Meles concluded. "This is a painful price to pay, but I know the value of these trials internally. The opposition needs to know that no matter how much they protest in Crawford, they cannot change democratic processes here." DAS Yamamoto pressed Meles that the unrest and trial of opposition leaders undercut and distracted Ethiopians from the process of democratization. (Charge had pressed Meles in prior meetings to not/not move forward on trials.) Yamamoto raised the idea of an amnesty or pardon to move beyond this crisis. Meles said no, for now.

VOA Conspiring with Ethiopian Opposition?

17. (C) The PM returned to familiar complaints concerning the Voice of America (VOA) Amharic service. He said the GOE had monitored calls in which employees of VOA had actually called opposition leaders in Ethiopia to discuss how to "spin" news stories to inflict maximum damage on the GOE. VOA interviewers had even "coached" some subjects in how to respond prior to questioning. DAS Yamamoto acknowledged the bias in some VOA reporting and promised to continue efforts in Washington to address it. Meles said that VOA was not just biased in its coverage of events in Ethiopia, but was in fact "part and parcel of the insurrection." German "Deutsche Velle" broadcasts, in contrast, had reflected anti-government bias, but its staff was not actively part of the conspiracy against the EPRDF. He also claimed that much of Ethiopia's private newspapers, several of whose editors were now under arrest, had spread the same kind of hate messages against the GOE.

PM Outlines Resumption of "March Toward Democracy"

18. (C) Now that unrest had been overcome, Meles said that his government would move ahead with a "march toward democracy." He said the ruling coalition would reenergize efforts in Parliament to pass a new press law, drawing on expertise and comparative studies from model parliamentary systems in the developed world. The models for the press law -- as for the analysis of the Parliament's rules of procedure -- would be the United Kingdom (because it was the oldest system) as well as Canada, Germany and India (because they were successful federal parliamentary systems.) The objective of the law would be to provide for freedom of the press, but with accountability. The GOE would hire its own international consultants to compare international systems with Ethiopia's and offer recommendations, and would accept donor financing, if available. If not, the GOE was prepared to pay itself for independent advice. The Charge presented the PM a letter on behalf of the Ambassadors' Donors Group (ADG) that offered

international assistance in reviewing Ethiopia's parliamentary rules. The PM pointed to a law passed that day to establish an independent commission to investigate the GOE's response to post-election unrest in June and November.

19. (C) The Charge told Meles that to overcome the distrust that existed he should present to the public the package of reforms he had just outlined to DAS Yamamoto, but Meles declined, claiming that he had already done so in previous media interviews. He claimed that Ethiopia was not going backward on its process toward democracy, and was waiting for the CUD to join it in Parliament.

110. (C) Meles indicated that Parliament would renew the mandate of current members of the National Electoral Board (NEB) through June 2006 so that they could carry out a study of "lessons learned" from 2005 elections and receive capacity-building assistance to address weaknesses identified in the Carter Center report. In June, Meles said he would appoint a new board. The PM said the GOE had already decided that local elections scheduled for mid-2006 would be postponed for a year. When Charge objected that the postponement would be interpreted badly by the public, Meles shot back that "the smart thing for us to do would have been to hold the elections early, while the opposition is still in disarray!"

GOE Dialogue with Opposition Won't Start Until Embassies
Finish Theirs

111. (C) Meles told Yamamoto and Charge pointedly that the GOE would not resume its suspended dialogue with opposition parties until ambassadors finished their dialogue. Intense contact between some embassies and opposition leaders had given the latter the idea that "this is where decisions get made," the PM complained. "Opposition parties need to know the right address for dialogue is right here." Meles added that he could not and would not interfere with such contact, but would merely allow this phase to play itself out. This approach would cost valuable time -- time Ethiopia could ill afford -- but there was no alternative. Once the GOE's dialogue with the opposition began, some foreigners might be invited in, but would never direct the process. When pressed for clarification by the Charge, Meles indicated that embassies' interaction with opposition leaders was a normal part of diplomacy; the problem was that some embassies seemed intent on "saving us Ethiopians from ourselves." Salvation, said the PM, must come from within.

PM Does Not Expect the CUD to Take Over Addis

112. (C) The PM expressed pessimism that a quorum of CUD leaders would take up their posts in the Addis Ababa Regional Council, "but you never know." He said he planned to delay plans to appoint a temporary government for the capital for another three weeks, but that he could not allow the city to continue in limbo for longer than that. Some CUD MPs appeared to want to take over the Addis administration, but feared that the Diaspora and others would brand them as traitors. Meles denied charges that the GOE had been harassing opposition MPs, and claimed that in fact CUD hard-liners had been harassing the nearly 50 CUD MPs that had earlier decided to join the national Parliament. He added that expected that 60 CUD MPs would ultimately join the Parliament. DAS Yamamoto asked whether the GOE would hold new elections to fill empty seats; Meles said the GOE was still studying the legal implications of a boycott in considering bi-elections.

Comment: Meles Asks for Political Space

113. (C) PM Meles is displaying a kind of respectful defiance of the international community as he builds Ethiopian democracy -- his way. He is demanding political space from the international community to take control of the political situation. He is clearly cognizant of growing concern among donors about his government's treatment of the opposition and appears to be accelerating some confidence-building steps on Parliament that he had been delaying, but he is determined to retain control over any reform process Ethiopia undertakes. With his government under pressure from many sides, he wants to show as little weakness as possible. While Meles may eventually soften his attitude on the release of some senior CUD leaders, we expect that it will not be for many months, if not years. In the meantime, we will be watching carefully to see if the GOE's planned democratic reforms in Parliament, the NEB and the media are genuine or only for external consumption.

